

Amanda Terkel, *Huffington Post*

WASHINGTON -- On Thursday, the House took up the International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act of 2010. The bill would ensure that child marriage is recognized as a human rights violation, and develop comprehensive strategies to prevent such marriages around the world. The legislation seemed likely to garner strong bipartisan support in Congress, and in the Senate, it did. But last night, the bill was voted down in the House by Republicans who argued the bill is too costly and could lead to increased abortions -- gripes the measure's supporters say have no basis in reality and are just excuses to kill the popular bill.

The measure, introduced by Sens. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) and Olympia Snowe (R-Maine), passed the Senate by unanimous consent and attracted a list of 42 cosponsors, including Sens. David Vitter (R-La.) and Roger Wicker (R-Miss.). It also had the support of nonpartisan groups like the YWCA. On Dec. 6, former president of Ireland Mary Robinson and Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu wrote an op-ed in *The Washington Post*, praising the United States for stepping up: "This act illustrates how support for securing a just and healthy life for every woman and girl transcends politics."

The House version, introduced by Reps. Betty McCollum (D-Minn.) and Ander Crenshaw (R-Fla.), had 112 cosponsors. What's interesting is that some of them -- such as Rep. Lee Terry (R-Neb.) -- actually voted against the bill. In the end, only 12 Republicans backed the measure; nine Democrats defected to the GOP side. So what happened?

This week, a GOP whip alert went out about the child marriage legislation, saying that House Minority Leader John Boehner (R-Ohio), Whip Eric Cantor (R-Va.) and Committee on Foreign Affairs Ranking Member Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.) all oppose it. The email:

S. 987 authorizes \$108 million over 5 years without sufficient oversight of the taxpayers' money. According to the Congressional Research Service, there is no available, confirmed figure on how much taxpayer funding is already being used to fight child marriage in developing countries and this bill does not address that issue.

In contrast, Ranking Member Ros-Lehtinen has introduced H.R. 6521, which would result in no more than \$1 million in potential costs, while making it clear that child marriage is a violation of human rights and that its prevention should be a goal of US foreign policy; requiring the creation of a multi-year strategy; requiring a comprehensive assessment of what the United States is

already doing and funding in the effort to fight child marriage; and requiring that the practice of child marriage in other countries be reported each year as part of the annual Human Rights Report.

There are also concerns that funding will be directed to NGOs that promote and perform abortion and efforts to combat child marriage could be usurped as a way to overturn pro-life laws.

The prevalence of child marriage remains alarmingly high worldwide. As CARE, a leading humanitarian organization fighting global poverty and supporting the child marriage prevention bill notes, "More than 60 million girls ages 17 and younger -- many as young as 10 -- are forced into marriage in developing countries. Many of these girls are married to men more than twice their age. Not only does this unacceptable practice thwart a girl's education, it endangers her health and often locks her into a life of poverty."

On Thursday, Durbin's office put out a statement sharply criticizing the House's failure to pass the bill: "The action on the House floor stopping the Child Marriage bill tonight will endanger the lives of millions of women and girls around the world. These young girls, enslaved in marriage, will be brutalized and many will die when their young bodies are torn apart while giving birth. Those who voted to continue this barbaric practice brought shame to Capitol Hill."

GOP concerns over abortion and the cost of the bill are puzzling. According to a Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimate, "CBO estimates that implementing the bill would cost \$67 million over the 2011-2015 period, assuming appropriation of the necessary amounts. Enacting S. 987 would not affect direct spending or revenues; therefore, pay-as-you-go procedures do not apply to this legislation."

Conor Williams writes in The Washington Post blog PostPartisan, "How can Republicans explain efforts to defeat a human rights bill because of \$67 million in potential spending while simultaneously pushing for a tax cut deal for wealthy Americans that will add \$858 billion to the deficit? Is this at all credible?"

On abortion, the bill never mentions either "family planning" or "abortion."

Friday morning, Rep. Steve LaTourette (R-Ohio), who voted for the bill, took the House floor and called out his Republican colleagues for their objections to the measure, saying such arguments amounted to nothing but politics:

Yesterday, I was on the floor, and I was a co-sponsor with a piece of legislation with the Gentlelady from Minnesota, Ms. McCollum, that would have moved money -- no new money -- would have moved money so that societies that are coercing young girls into marriage, we could build them latrines so they could go to school. Or we could make sure that they stay in school so they're not forced into marriage at the age of 12 and 13.

But all of a sudden, there was a fiscal argument. When that didn't work, then people had to add an abortion element to it. Look, this is a partisan place. I'm a Republican. I'm glad we beat their butt in the election; we're going to be in the majority next year. But there comes a time when enough is enough, and McCollum's bill was a good bill last night. ... We should stop the nonsense, approve the bill and move on.

Neither Ros-Lehtinen nor Rep. Dan Burton (R-Ind.), both opponents of the child marriage prevention bill, returned inquiries for comment.

UPDATE, 6:16 p.m.: Statement from McCollum:

Child marriage is a global challenge that knows no politics. Every day, it brutally destroys millions of young girls' lives. If nothing is done, this barbaric practice will force millions more girls into a life of slavery, sex abuse, domestic violence, and servitude.

Senate Democrats and Republicans didn't play partisan politics in this vote; they unanimously recognized that the United States can and should become a leader in the fight against child marriage. Had this legislation contained abortion provisions or authorized new spending, it never would have unanimously passed the Senate.

I thank the 229 Democrats who voted for this bill as well as the 12 Republicans. I am especially grateful for Senators Durbin, Brownback, Kerry, Lugar, and Snowe who worked to get this bipartisan agreement passed.

The International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act failed last night not because of the issue, but because a handful of Republicans chose partisan politics over the basic human rights of young girls. I am truly disappointed in this result, but I'm not giving up on these children.